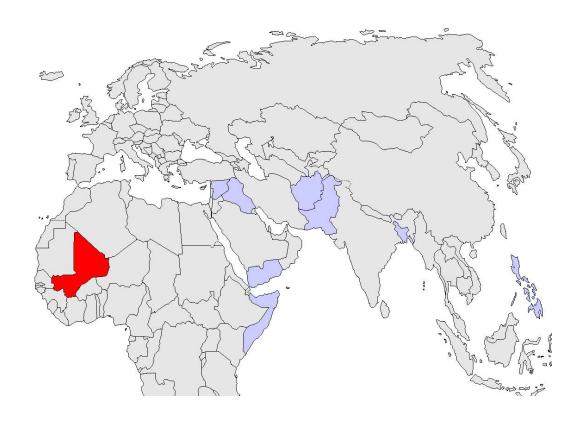# Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study

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With contributions from Pamela G. Faber

October 2017

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Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017. In order to conduct this assessment, CNA used a comparative methodology that included eight case studies on groups affiliated or associated with Al-Qaeda. These case studies were then used as a dataset for cross-case comparison. This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) case study used in the Independent Assessment. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.

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Abstract

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states: "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.

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Glossary

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
AQS	Al-Qaeda Syria
ASD (SO/LIC)	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
AST	Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia
CMSE	Civil Military Support Elements
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
GIA	Armed Islamic Group
GSPC	Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance
JSOTF-TS	Joint Special Operations Task Force – Trans Sahara
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MIST	Military Information Support Teams
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
SGI	Security Governance Initiative
TSCTP	Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Introduction

Section 1228 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) states, "The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall provide for the conduct of an independent assessment of the effectiveness of the United States' efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, including its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents since September 11, 2001." The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (ASD (SO/LIC)) asked CNA to conduct this independent assessment, which was completed in August 2017.[1]

Section 1228 specified that the independent assessment should include these topics:

1. An assessment of Al-Qaeda core's current relationship with affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

2. An assessment of the current objectives, capabilities, and overall strategy of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how they have changed over time.

3. An assessment of the operational and organizational structure of Al-Qaeda core, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents, and how it has changed over time.

4. An analysis of the activities that have proven to be most effective and least effective at disrupting and dismantling Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

5. Recommendations for United States policy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al-Qaeda, its affiliated groups, associated groups, and adherents.

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[1] Julia McQuaid, Jonathan Schroden, Pamela G. Faber, P. Kathleen Hammerberg, Alexander Powell, Zack Gold, David Knoll, and William Rosenau, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda,* CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

In order to answer the first four questions posed by Section 1228, CNA conducted eight case studies on groups affiliated and associated with Al-Qaeda.[2] The case studies were then used to conduct a cross-case comparative analysis.

This document is a stand-alone version of the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) case study used in the *Independent Assessment*. CNA is publishing each of the eight case studies separately for the convenience of analysts and others who may have a regional or functional focus that corresponds to a specific case study. For the context in which this case study was used and for CNA's full findings, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*[3]

The present case study is organized as follows: First, we introduce AQIM by highlighting its leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. Second, we explain the evolution of the group by phases, from its origins to the present day. Third, we outline the vulnerabilities in the areas of Mali where AQIM operates. Fourth, we outline the U.S. approach to countering AQIM. We conclude the case study with a discussion on whether the U.S. has, at any time, effectively defeated, dismantled, or disrupted the group.

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[2] These groups include: Al-Qaeda "core," Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shebab, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda Syria (AQS), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

[3] McQuaid et al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda.*

Overview of AQIM

Leadership and structure

AQIM originated in Algeria and has substantial Saharan operations. It is led by an emir, Algerian national Abd al-Malik Droukdel. He works with the Shura (Consultative) Council and the Council of Notables, all based in Algeria. AQIM is organized into battalions, which have several dozen fighters in them at any given time.[4] Battalion commanders have considerable independence, especially in the Sahara.[5] In the mid-2000s, AQIM's Saharan battalions—particularly Tariq ibn Ziyad and the Veiled Men—competed against one another and at times disobeyed Al-Qaeda Central's leadership.[6] AQIM's northern Algerian battalions are generally considered weaker than their Saharan counterparts.[7]

AQIM has undergone various schisms and rapprochements. In 2011, a Mauritanian-led group broke away, calling itself the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).[8] In December 2012, the Veiled Men Battalion split from AQIM, rebranding

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[4] Andrew Lebovich estimates the size of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Veiled Men Battalion at 40 fighters in 2011, based on French press reports of the deposition of a Mauritanian AQIM member. See "A Look Inside AQIM," *Al-Wasat*, January 15, 2012, https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/a-look-inside-aqim/.

[5] Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, *Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara*, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1, 2012, pp. 3-4, http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents /2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%20its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel% 20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf.

[6] Andrew Lebovich, "Look Inside AQIM," *Al Wasat*, January 15, 2012, https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/01/15/a-look-inside-aqim/.

[7] Andreas Hagen, *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and Their Networks*, AEI Critical Threats Project, March 2014, slide 22, http://www.slideshare.net/CriticalThreats/aqim-leaders-and-their-networks.

[8] Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots: AQIM and Its Offshoots in the Sahara," in *Jihadism in Africa: Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances*, ed. Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber, 69-84 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2015), pp.

itself Signers in Blood (Al-Muwaqqi'un bi-l-Dam). In August 2013, the Veiled Men and MUJWA merged to form a new group, al-Murabitun. In late 2015, AQIM reincorporated al-Murabitun, perhaps to present a united front against ISIL.[9] In March 2017, a new coalition called Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims) unified AQIM's Saharan battalions, al-Murabitun, and two Malian jihadist groups, Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith) and the Masina Liberation Front. The group is led by Malian national and long-time AQIM ally Iyad Ag Ghali, who reports to Droukdel.[10]

There are two small breakaway units that pledged allegiance to ISIL and have not been reintegrated into AQIM: Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), based in northern Algeria, was created in September 2014. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara pledged allegiance to ISIL in al-Murabitun's name in May 2015, but was disavowed by al-Murabitun's leader.[11] Neither group has posed a significant challenge to AQIM so far.

Relationship with the core

In the early 1990s, AQIM's indirect predecessor, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), was in loose contact with Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who gave the group some funding. In the mid-1990s, the GIA and Al-Qaeda had a falling out.[12] AQIM's direct predecessor, the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), broke away from the GIA in 1998. After some initial efforts at joining in 2000, the group re-

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76-77, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05 _sbg_web.pdf.

[9] Andrew Lebovich, "The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, January 19, 2016, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region.

[10] See the group's founding statement, available at http://jihadology.net/2017/03/02/new-video-message-from-jamaah-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-founding-statement/.

[11] "Sahara Islamist Leader Belmokhtar Dismisses ISIS Pledge: Report," Al Arabiya/Reuters, May 17, 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2015/05/17/Sahara-Islamist-leader-Belmokhtar-dismisses-ISIS-pledge-report.html.

[12] Mohamed Mokeddem, *Les Afghans algériens: De la Djamaâ à la Qa'îda*, trans. Mehenna Hamadouche (Algiers: Editions ANEP, 2002), pp. 185-190; and Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Long Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 17.

established connections with Al-Qaeda.[13] In 2001–2002, an Al-Qaeda emissary toured the GSPC's camps.[14]

In 2003, the GSPC pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda.[15] The GSPC developed ties to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), taking strategic and tactical guidance from AQI's Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, with whom Droukdel corresponded starting in 2004. Al-Zarqawi helped to facilitate the GSPC's merger with Al-Qaeda.[16]

The GSPC formally merged with Al-Qaeda in 2006 and adopted the name AQIM in January 2007.[17] Bin Laden blessed the merger, but it was managed by al-Zawahiri.[18] The GSPC was weak at the time of the merger, lacking weapons, popular support, and

[13] Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," Ifriqiya al-Muslima, 30 December 2015, p. 3, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3mmad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf. See also Agence Nouakchott d'Information, "Amir 'Katibat al-Mulaththamin' Khalid Abu al-'Abbas fi Muqabala Muthira ma'a Akhbar Nuakchut [The Emir of the Veiled Men Battalion, Khalid Abu al-Abbas, in an Interesting Interview with Nouakchott News]," 9 November 2011, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/khc481lid-abc5ab-al-abbc481s-mukhtc481r-bin-mue1b8a5ammad-bilmukhtc481r-interview-with-nouakchott-news-ar.pdf.

[14] Abu Akram Hisham, "Al-Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Yamani: Rihlatuhu ila al-Jaza'ir wa-Qissat Istishhadihi [Shaykh Abu Muhammad the Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom]," Ifriqiya al-Muslima, 30 December 2015, p. 3, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/abucc84-akram-hishacc84m-e2809cmessages-from-the-mujacc84hid_s-notebook-2-shaykh-abucc84-muhcca3mmad-al-yamanicc84-his-trip-to-algeria-and-the-story-of-his-martyrdom22.pdf.

[15] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qa'ida and the Jihadi Dynamics in the Sahel," Middle East Institute (National University of Singapore), Insight 91, February 13, 2013, https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/website/new_TMPL/Al-Qaida-and-the-Jihadi-Dynamics-in-the-Sahel.

[16] Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times* Magazine, February 13, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html.

[17] "Algerian Extremists Pledge Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," AFP, October 22, 2003, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-10-23/algerian-extremists-pledge-allegiance-to-Al-Qaeda/1497716; and Barak Mendelsohn, *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 128.

[18] Mekhennet et al., "Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline From Al Qaeda." *The New York Times*. June 7, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01algeria.html; and, "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/ 2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html.

morale.[19] Droukdel may have hoped that the merger would solidify his control over GSPC battalions and bring other North African jihadist groups under his control, but neither hope was realized.[20]

Though under Al-Qaeda's banner, AQIM's ties to Al-Qaeda core were loose. Initial funding from the core, estimated at several hundred thousand dollars, allowed AQIM to perpetrate the December 2007 suicide bombing at the United Nations building in Algiers.[21] The merger boosted recruitment, quickly drawing about twenty Moroccans and several dozen Mauritanians to AQIM's Saharan units.[22] Yet AQIM functioned largely autonomously.[23] Al-Qaeda core sometimes sought to give AQIM strategic guidance, but AQIM sometimes rejected the advice. For example, Al-Qaeda core insisted that AQIM make political demands when negotiating with European governments over hostages, rather than just seeking ransom payments.[24] Al-Qaeda core also advised AQIM "to avoid being occupied with [fighting] the local security forces," and to instead concentrate on fighting Americans in the region.[25] In neither case did AQIM closely follow these suggestions. The death of Bin Laden and the elevation of al-Zawahiri to overall leadership of Al-Qaeda did not bring Al-Qaeda core

[19] See Younis al-Mauritani's letter to Al-Qaeda Central, dated August 19, 2007 (signed Salih al-Mauritani, one of his aliases), translated and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in January 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/ documents/ubl2017/english/Addendum%20to%20the%20report%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Ma ghreb.pdf.

[20] Lianne Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*, Combating Terrorism Center, April 2007, p. 6 and p. 8, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Kennedy_GSPC_041207_update.pdf.

[21] Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum." *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html

[22] Al-Mauritani letter to Al-Qaeda Central, p. 4.

[23] Geoff Porter, "The Impact of Bin Laden's Death on AQIM in North Africa," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, May 1, 2011, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-impact-of-bin-ladin%E2%80%99s-death-on-aqim-in-north-africa.

[24] "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," September 26, 2010, recovered at Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and declassified by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, May 20, 2015, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/ Letter%20to%20Shaykh%20Mahmud%2026%20September%202010.pdf. See also "Gist of Conversation October 11," recovered at bin Laden's compound and declassified by ODNI on May 20, 2015, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Gist%20of%20 conversation%20Oct%2011.pdf.

[25] "Letter Addressed to Atiyah," document recovered at Osama bin Laden's compound, declassified by ODNI, May 20, 2015, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ ubl/english/Letter%20Addressed%20to%20Atiyah.pdf.

and AQIM demonstrably closer.[26] Decisions within AQIM continue to occur primarily at the battalion level, and battalion commanders regularly buck the orders of Droukdel, to say nothing of those coming from al-Zawahiri.

In the split between Al-Qaeda and ISIL, AQIM has sided firmly with Al-Qaeda and al-Zawahiri. AQIM has also moved closer to AQAP. Since 2014, the two groups have released several joint statements, one of them a condemnation of ISIL.[27] AQIM has clashed with ISIL's would-be affiliate in the Sahara, but AQIM leaders still hope to reabsorb the defectors, and they use relatively conciliatory language about ISIL's local supporters.[28]

Ideology and goals

AQIM's predecessors sought to overthrow the Algerian state and replace it with their hardline version of an "Islamic" state. Whereas the GIA turned against the Algerian population, the GSPC concentrated on attacking military targets. AQIM has retained the GSPC's strategy, and Droukdel has said that AQIM's objective for the Maghreb region is "to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people."[29] AQIM vehemently rejects French influence and Western influence generally. Influential Saharan battalion commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar stated in a 2006 interview that AQIM's violence in the Sahel was responding to the growing U.S. military presence there, perhaps referring to the

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[26] William McCants, "How Zawahiri Lost Al-Qaeda," *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-zawahiri-lost-Al-Qaeda/.

[27] Adam Taylor, "The Dispute Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Has Devolved to Name-Calling," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/02/the-dispute-between-Al-Qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-has-devolved-to-name-calling/?utm_term=.5e0045ddcd33. A January 2016 statement threatened Saudi Arabia. See SITE Intelligence Group, "AQAP, AQIM Threaten KSA in Joint Statement on Prisoner Execution," January 10, 2016, https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aqap-aqim-threaten-ksa-in-joint-statement-on-prisoner-executions.html.

[28] "Abu al-Hammam fi Awwal Muqabala Lahu ba'd al-Tadakhkhul al-Faransi bi-Mali [Abu Hammam in His First Interview after the French Intervention in Mali]," Al Akhbar, January 10, 2016, http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html.

[29] ''An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel,'' *The New York Times*, July 1, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html

United States' Pan-Sahel Initiative, which ran from 2002 to 2005, and its successor program, the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership.[30]

Yet since the mid-2000s, AQIM has seemed to acknowledge that the overthrow of the Algerian state is now a remote dream at best. By most accounts, Algeria's internal security organs are among the most capable on the continent. Additionally, although the GSPC's initial move into the Sahara may have been motivated by survival and a desire to rebuild its financial strength and manpower, the "Sahara-ization" of the GSPC/AQIM led the group to focus heavily on trans-Saharan crime, including kidnappings and drug smuggling.[31]

The jihadist occupation of Mali in 2012-2013 evoked bitter internal debate within AQIM concerning strategy. Droukdel rebuked local commanders, warning them that by rushing to impose a hardline version of shari'a, they were antagonizing civilians, potential political allies, and key tribes.[32] For his part, Belmokhtar complained that AQIM was insufficiently ambitious: "Over the course of a decade, we have not seen a proper military attack, despite extraordinary financial capabilities. Our work has been limited to the routine of kidnappings, of which the mujahidin are getting bored."[33]

French-led operations shattered the northern Malian jihadist emirate in 2013. Since then, AQIM has operated as a clandestine terrorist group, seeking to stage spectacular attacks and to lay the groundwork for future jihadist emirates in North Africa and the Sahara. Some AQIM leaders claim that AQIM is succeeding in its goals, or is at least thwarting France's ambitions in the Sahel.[34]

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[30] Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, "Hiwar ma'a al-Qa'id Khalid Abi Abbas – Amir al-Mintaqa al-Sahrawiyya li-l-Jama'a al-Salafiyya li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Qital, [Dialogue with the Leader Khalid Abi Abbas (Mokhtar Belmokhtar) – the Emir of the Desert Region for the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat," May 5, 2006, http://www.ilmway.com/site/maqdis/MS_37048.html.

[31] Andrew Lebovich, "Trying to Understand MUJWA," *Al Wasat*, August 22, 2012, https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/trying-to-understand-mujwa/.

[32] Letter from Abdelmalek Droukdel to local AQIM fighters in Timbuktu, 2012, recovered by the Associated Press in 2013, available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/Al-Qaeda-manifesto.pdf.

[33] AQIM, "Al Qaida Belmokhtar Letter," dated October 3, 2012 and released by Associated Press in 2013, p. 26; available at: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmoktar-letter-english.pdf.

[34] "Abu al-Hammam fi Awwal Muqabala Lahu ba'd al-Tadakhkhul al-Faransi bi-Mali [Abu Hammam in His First Interview after the French Intervention in Mali]," Al Akhbar, 10 January 2016, http://alakhbar.info/intrep/interv/13563-2016-01-10-18-02-56.html.

AQIM has shown limited inclination to carry out attacks in the United States and Europe, despite the precedent of the GIA's attacks on France in 1994 and 1995. AQIM has kidnapped Westerners and has attacked foreign assets in North Africa and the Sahara, including embassies, United Nations buildings, and UN peacekeepers. Yet AQIM has rarely attempted to kidnap Americans, and has not directly attacked U.S. military personnel in the region. Given that the United States has a policy of not paying ransoms, its citizens are not as vulnerable as are Canadian and European nationals—except for Americans working in the energy sector, who may be caught up in AQIM attacks on infrastructure. Finally, AQIM has shown little interest in mobilizing "remote-controlled" attacks in the United States or Europe, in the manner that AQAP and ISIL have.

Funding

Much of AQIM's funding has come from kidnappings for ransom, beginning with a reported $6 million ransom paid after its first major kidnapping in 2003.[35] Between 2008 and 2012, AQIM kidnapped 39 Westerners in the region. With European governments paying amounts anywhere up to $10 million per hostage, AQIM has amassed upwards of $50 million.[36] AQIM's wealth may have declined since 2013—defeat in Mali, as well as a decline in European tourism in the Sahara, has hurt AQIM's ability to kidnap Europeans and obtain ransoms. As of February 2017, AQIM held some eight foreigners in the Sahara.[37] AQIM has long been suspected of smuggling contraband goods and illicit drugs in the Sahara and North Africa, but the evidence is thin regarding AQIM's participation in drug trafficking.[38]

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[35] "Newspaper: Berlin Paid Ransom to Free Hostages," *Deutsche Welle*, August 6, 2004, http://www.dw.com/en/newspaper-berlin-paid-ransom-to-free-hostages/a-1289545.

[36] Lacher and Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots," p. 70. See also Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-Al-Qaedas-patron.html?_r=0.

[37] @MENASTREAM, tweet, February 8, 2017, https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/829508858074783746.

[38] Lacher, "Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel." See also Sahara Medias, "Entretien avec Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, journaliste mauritanien, auteur de «Le Ben Laden du Sahara, sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar»," November 6, 2014, http://fr.saharamedias.net/Entretien-avec-Lemine-Ould-Mohamed-Salem-journaliste-mauritanien-auteur-de-Le-Ben-Laden-du-Sahara-sur-les-traces-du_a5145.html.

Evolution of AQIM by Phase

Phase one: Prehistory (1991–2003)

During the 1990s, Algeria experienced a civil war following the military's annulment of the 1991–1992 parliamentary elections. The government fought diverse factions of Islamists and jihadists. In the midst of the war, the forerunners of AQIM were two jihadist groups, the GIA and its offshoot the GSPC. Starting in 1996, the GIA's brutality—including massacring civilians and assassinating prominent Islamists—alienated many of its supporters.[39] The GSPC broke away from the GIA in 1998, promising to refocus the jihad on the Algerian state. In the late 1990s, Algeria's civil war wound down, and mainstream Islamist fighters accepted a government amnesty; the GIA and GSPC were marginalized. The GIA faded after the death of its leader Antar Zouabri in 2002. In November 2004, Algerian forces arrested the last known emir of the GIA, which by then had been largely superseded by the GSPC.[40]

Between its founding in 1998 and 2003, the GSPC had limited capabilities. Between 2000 and 2003, it released a newsletter called *Sada al-Qital* (The Echo of Combat). Issues of the newsletter featured reports on GSPC raids against military installations,[41] but the group remained small.

Phase two: The early Saharan turn (2003–2006)

After the GSPC broke with the GIA, and after Algeria's civil war wound down, the GSPC made a "Saharan turn," increasing its operations in southern Algeria and the

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[39] Umar Abd al-Hakim [Abu Mus'ab al-Suri], *Mukhtasar Shahadati 'ala al-Jihad fi al-Jaza'ir 1988-1996* (self-published, 2004), p. 6.

[40] "Algeria Reveals Rebel Crackdown," BBC News, January 4, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk /2/hi/africa/4144265.stm.

[41] *Sada al-Qital*, available through the Jihadi Document Repository at the University of Oslo.

Sahara in order to ensure its own survival and to compensate for its inability to overthrow the Algerian state.[42] This period coincided with the GSPC's pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda and the increasing contact between the two groups. In 2004, GSPC emir Nabil Sahraoui was killed by Algerian security forces. He was replaced by Droukdel.[43]

The Saharan turn began in early 2003, when the GSPC kidnapped 32 European tourists in southeastern Algeria. The hostages were ransomed by the German government, working through Malian national and future AQIM ally Iyad Ag Ghali.[44] The GSPC also began to attack local government targets: in June 2005, the GSPC raided an army post at Lemgheitty, in the far northeastern Mauritanian desert.

As part of its Saharan turn, the GSPC/AQIM established a deep presence in northern Mali, initially led by Saharan commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He and Algerian national Yahya Abu Hammam reportedly based themselves in Mali as early as 2003.[45] AQIM wooed northern Malian populations through a combination of embedding itself in the smuggling economy that connects Algeria and Mali, and making religious appeals. AQIM commanders and fighters also intermarried with local families; Belmokhtar reportedly married at least one woman in Mali.[46] AQIM also cultivated contacts among Malian Arabs and the Tuareg. Additionally, AQIM and its intermediaries built networks of collusion with Malian state officials who tolerated smuggling and kidnapping.[47]

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[42] Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," *Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin* 85 (Spring 2010): 12-29, http://concernedafricascholars.org/docs/bulletin85harmon.pdf.

[43] Cherif Ouazani, "Le Ben Laden du Maghreb," *Jeune Afrique*, September 14, 2009, http://www.jeuneafrique.com/201193/politique/le-ben-laden-du-maghreb/.

[44] "Ex-Partner of Germany Leads Malian Islamists," Spiegel Online, January 21, 2013, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/leader-of-malian-islamists-once-helped-german-government-a-878724.html.

[45] United Nations Security Council, "Djamel Akkacha," version as of September 9, 2014, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/djamel-akkacha.

[46] Agence Nouakchott d'Information, "Amir 'Katibat al-Mulaththamin' Khalid Abu al-'Abbas fi Muqabala Muthira ma'a Akhbar Nuakchut [The Emir of the Veiled Men Battalion, Khalid Abu al-Abbas, in an Interesting Interview with Nouakchott News]," 9 November 2011, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/khc481lid-abc5ab-al-abbc481s-mukhtc481r-bin-mue1b8a5ammad-bilmukhtc481r-interview-with-nouakchott-news-ar.pdf.

[47] Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, "Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1, 2012, p. 2, http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%2

Phase three: Intensive kidnappings in the Sahara, renewed terrorism in Algeria (2006–2011)

The GSPC joined Al-Qaeda in 2006 and became AQIM in 2007. After 2008, AQIM made Mali the epicenter of its kidnapping operations; AQIM used Mali to hold hostages from its kidnappings in Niger; it kidnapped Europeans inside Mali, including four Europeans taken at a desert music festival in January 2009,[48] and seized a Frenchman in November 2009.[49]

AQIM also targeted Mauritania. By 2007, AQIM had established a small, amateurish cell in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott.[50] Some of the cell's members murdered four French tourists near Aleg in 2007.[51] Subsequent AQIM attacks in Mauritania included a February 2008 raid by gunmen on the Israeli embassy and a nearby nightclub, a September 2008 ambush of Mauritanian soldiers near Zouerate,[52] an unsuccessful but fatal kidnapping attempt on an American citizen in Nouakchott in June 2009,[53] an unsuccessful suicide bombing outside the French embassy in August 2009, the kidnapping of three Spanish aid workers traveling between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in November 2009,[54] a suicide car bombing at a military outpost near

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0its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel%20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf; Morten Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, April 28, 2014, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/guns-money-and-prayers-aqims-blueprint-for-securing-control-of-northern-mali; Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*. The Carnegie Papers. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf.

[48] Helen Pidd, "Background: The kidnapping of Edwin Dyer," *The Guardian* (London), June 3, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/03/edwin-dyer-hostage-killed-Al-Qaeda.

[49] "African Al-Qaeda Demands Swap for French Hostage," BBC News, January 11, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8452500.stm.

[50] Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html

[51] "Tourists Shot Dead in Mauritania," BBC News, December 24, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7159420.stm.

[52] Nicholas Schmidle, "Saharan Conundrum." *The New York Times Magazine*.

[53] "African Al-Qaeda 'Killed' US Man," BBC News, June 25, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8118328.stm.

[54] Mark Tran, "Three Spanish Aid Workers Kidnapped in Mauritania," *The Guardian* (London), November 30, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/30/spanish-aid-workers-kidnapped-mauritania.

Nema in August 2010,[55] and a failed plot to assassinate Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abd al-Aziz in 2011.[56] AQIM attacks in Mauritania ended in 2011, possibly due to a secret truce between Abd al-Aziz and AQIM.[57] Before and after 2011, Mauritania has been a key recruiting site for AQIM.[58]

During this period, AQIM treated Niger primarily as a zone for kidnappings, including two Canadian diplomats in December 2008,[59] seven workers of the uranium mining company Areva in September 2010,[60] and two Frenchmen in 2011.[61] Toward the end of this period, AQIM developed some ties to jihadist groups in Nigeria. At least three Nigerian jihadists involved with Boko Haram trained with AQIM's Tariq ibn Ziyad Battalion prior to 2009. They put Boko Haram in touch with AQIM senior leadership after the failure of Boko Haram's mass uprising in July 2009. Boko Haram sought training and weapons, especially bomb-making training and materials, from AQIM.[62] Boko Haram also wrote to Bin Laden asking to join Al-Qaeda,[63] but Boko

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[55] The Moor Next Door, "Mauritania Car Bombing at Nema," August 24, 2010, https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2010/08/24/mauritania-car-bombing-at-nema/.

[56] The Moor Next Door, "AQIM Assassination Attempt on O. Abdel Aziz," February 2, 2011, https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/aqim-assassination-attempt-on-o-abdel-aziz/. See AQIM's statement on the attempt here: http://jihadology.net/2011/02/09/new-statement-from-al-qa%E2%80%99idah-in-the-islamic-maghreb-a-statement-claiming-the-assassination-attempt-of-frances-client-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-uld-abd-al-aziz/.

[57] Mark Hosenball, "Al-Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal with Mauritania: Documents," Reuters, March 2, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-binladen-mauritania-idUSKCN0W356G. The document in question is available here: https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20about%20 matter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf.

[58] The Moor Next Door, "Thoughts RE: Recent AQIM Video," August 29, 2010, https://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2010/08/29/thoughts-re-recent-aqim-video/.

[59] "Canada: Two Diplomats Missing in Niger," CNN, December 15, 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/12/15/canada.un.kidnap/.

[60] "French Nationals Among Seven Workers Kidnapped in Niger," BBC News, September 16, 2010, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11325749.

[61] "Al-Qaeda Claims Kidnapping of Frenchmen Found Dead," Reuters, January 13, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-qaeda-kidnapping-idUSTRE70C57F20110113.

[62] Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, "Letter from Abdallah Abu Zayd Abd-al-Hamid to Abu Mus ab Abd-al-Wadud," August 24, 2009, translated and published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 19, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%2 0Zayd%20Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%20ab%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf.

[63] Abubakar Shekau, "Praise Be to God, the Lord of All Worlds," letter to Osama Bin Laden, likely 2010, translated and published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 1,

Haram never became an official Al-Qaeda affiliate. AQIM publicly offered Boko Haram assistance in February 2010,[64] and may have trained the Boko Haram suicide bombers who attacked Nigeria's capital of Abuja in two separate incidents in June 2011 and August 2011. However, AQIM also helped establish the Boko Haram breakaway sect Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (better known as Ansaru) in 2011–2012.[65] Ansaru publicly criticized Boko Haram's leadership and its willingness to kill civilians.

As it conducted attacks and built local ties in the Sahara and in West Africa, the GSPC/AQIM continued to target northern Algeria. Starting in 2005, the GSPC began to use bombings more frequently.[66] AQIM's peak year for high-profile terrorism inside Algeria was 2007. In April 2007, AQIM perpetrated twin suicide bombings in the capital Algiers, targeting the office of then–Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem and a police station. In December 2007, AQIM conducted another twin bombing in Algiers, targeting the United Nations headquarters and the Supreme Constitutional Court. Another significant year was 2011, when AQIM fighters carried out numerous raids and bombings targeting soldiers and police.[67] The Algerian security forces, however, have limited AQIM's presence in northern Algeria.[68]

In terms of media, the GSPC replaced its newsletter *Sada al-Qital* with a new publication, *Al-Jama'a* (The Group) from 2004–2006,[69] but discontinued that

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2016, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Praise%20be%20to%20God%20the%20Lord%20of%20all%20worlds.pdf.

[64] "Hal Tahalafat al-Qa'ida ma'a Buku Haram? [Has al-Qa'ida Allied with Boko Haram?]" Al Jazeera, June 16, 2010, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2010/6/16/%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%83%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85.

[65] Abu Usamatul Ansary, "A Message from Nigeria," *Al-Risalah* 4 (January 2017): 18-21, p. 21, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/al-risacc84lah-magazine-4.pdf.

[66] Hanna Rogan, "Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11," *CTC Sentinel*, November 15, 2008, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/violent-trends-in-algeria-since-911.

[67] Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, September 26, 2011, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim-returns-in-force-in-northern-algeria.

[68] Geoff Porter, "AQIM's Objectives in North Africa," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, February 1, 2011, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim%E2%80%99s-objectives-in-north-africa.

[69] Issues of *Al-Jama'a* are available through the Jihadi Document Repository at the University of Oslo.

publication when the group formally joined Al-Qaeda. After the affiliation, AQIM developed a highly professional media wing called Al-Andalus.

Phase four: The Arab Spring and the jihadist occupation of Northern Mali (January 2011–January 2013)

Inside Algeria, the Arab Spring protest movement failed to challenge the regime's stability and did not offer AQIM a political opening. AQIM played no military role in the Tunisian and Libyan revolutions of 2011,[70] but the group sought to shape the revolutions there. AQIM worked with local jihadist groups, especially Ansar al-Sharia, in both Tunisia and Libya. In 2012, AQIM launched a small unit in Tunisia, the Uqba ibn Nafi Battalion.[71] The battalion publicized its link to AQIM in 2015, and has likely absorbed some members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), but its "low-level insurgency… has not altered the status quo in Tunisia."[72] AQIM issued statements supporting the revolution in Libya, and urging Libyans to create an Islamic state.[73]

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[70] Aaron Zelin and Andrew Lebovich, "Assessing al-Qa'ida's Presence in the New Libya," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, March 22, 2012, https://www.ctc.usma.edu//posts/assessing-Al-Qaedas-presence-in-the-new-libya.

[71] Aaron Zelin, Andrew Lebovich, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy," Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel*, July 23, 2013, https://www.ctc.usma.edu//posts/al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-tunisia-strategy. See AQIM's statements from January 2011 here: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/statement-from-the-amc4abr-of-al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghreb-abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-abd-al-malik-drc5abkdc4abl-in-support-of-the-intifada-of-our-people-in-tunisi.pdf and here: https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-to-our-people-in-tunisia-the-tyrant-has-fled-but-the-infidel-and-tyrannical-system-remains.pdf.

[72] Aaron Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Tunisia," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, May 11, 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/05/icsr-insight-islamic-state-Al-Qaeda-tunisia/.

[73] Abd al-Malik Droukdel/Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud, "Tahni'a bi-Intisar Ahfad 'Umar al-Mukhtar [Congratulations Upon the Victory of the Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar]," Nukhbat al-I'lam al-Jihadi, October 2011, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-abd-al-malik-drc5abkdc4abl-congratulations-on-the-victory-of-the-descendants-of-umar-al-mukhtc481r.pdf. See also Droukdel/Abd al-Wadud, "Nusra li-l-Ahrar Ahfad 'Umar al-Mukhtar [Support for the Free Ones, the Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar]," Nukhbat al-I'lam al-Jihadi, March 2011, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-al-wadc5abd-support-for-the-free-descendants-of-umar-al-mukhtc481r.pdf. Umar al-Mukhtar was an anti-colonial fighter in early twentieth-century Libya.

Since the Arab Spring, AQIM has used southern Libya as a rear base, training center, and smuggling hub.[74]

Meanwhile, AQIM seized the opportunity to join a rebellion in northern Mali, acting initially as a quiet and minor player, but soon taking center stage as its partners established a short-lived jihadist emirate. During 2010-2011, activists in northern Mali and the diaspora prepared the ground for a separatist Tuareg rebellion. The Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (French acronym, MNLA) formed in October 2011, and proclaimed the goal of establishing an independent state of "Azawad" in northern Mali. When AQIM's ally and negotiating partner Iyad Ag Ghali failed to secure leadership of the MNLA (or, alternatively, when he rejected the group's aims), he formed his own group—the jihadist Ansar al-Din.[75] These developments allowed AQIM to capitalize on splits within the Tuareg rebel leadership.[76]

AQIM provided Ansar al-Din with military, financial, and logistical support.[77] Ansar al-Din soon joined forces with AQIM and an AQIM offshoot, MUJWA. After Ansar al-Din and the MNLA cooperated between January and March 2012 to capture northern Malian cities, the partnership collapsed. Ansar al-Din proclaimed that its goal was not the MNLA's vision of separatism but, rather, the imposition of sharia.[78] After attempts to work out a truce in April and May, the jihadist groups drove the MNLA out of major northern Malian cities by June.

In January 2013, the jihadist coalition in northern Mali advanced into the country's central Mopti and Segou regions. The advance provoked a French military intervention, Operation Serval. Together with African partners, especially Chad, the French drove jihadists out of northern Malian cities and began hunting them in the northern Malian desert. The jihadist occupation of northern Mali caused a spike in

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[74] Sarah Topol, "Guns and Poses," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2014, http://harpers.org/archive/2014/12/guns-and-poses/.

[75] Andy Morgan, "Alghabass Ag Intalla – Interview with the Head of the MIA," Andy Morgan Writes, January 31, 2013, http://www.andymorganwrites.com/interview-with-alghabass-ag-intalla-head-of-the-islamic-movement-of-azawad-mia/.

[76] Lacher and Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots," German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Jihadism in Africa, June 2015, p 69. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf

[77] United Nations Security Council, "Abdelmalek Droukdel," version as of September 9, 2014, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/abdelmalek-droukdel.

[78] Catherine Gouëset, "Touareg, islamistes, Aqmi: ils se disputent le nord du Mali," *L'Express*, April 3, 2012, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-touareg-islamistes-aqmi-ils-se-disputent-le-nord-du-pays_1100847.html.

AQIM's Saharan and Sahelian recruitment, perhaps to several thousand affiliated fighters, but the collapse of the jihadist enclave meant that AQIM's numbers in the Sahara shrank again—perhaps to as low as a few hundred fighters.[79]

Phase five: Terrorism after the fall of the Malian enclave (January 2013–present)

Since the completion of Operation Serval, French intervention has killed several commanders from AQIM and allied groups, including Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd (killed in February 2013).[80] A U.S. drone strike in Libya may have killed Belmokhtar in November 2016.[81]

Starting in 2013, AQIM and its allies launched a campaign of terrorist attacks in northern Mali and beyond. Within Mali, AQIM now often targets the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). AQIM also works to destabilize the peace process between the Malian government and non-jihadist rebel groups.

Beyond Mali, AQIM and its offshoots and allies—especially Belmokhtar's fighters—have perpetrated several major attacks on hotels and energy infrastructure. Hotel attacks include the November 2015 attack in Bamako, Mali; the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; and the March 2016 attack in Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire. Attacks on energy infrastructure include two incidents: the mass hostage-taking at the Tigentourine gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria by Belmokhtar's unit in January 2013, and Belmokhtar's twin suicide bombings of the Somair uranium mine in Arlit, Niger, and an army barracks in Agadez, Niger, in May 2013.[82] Starting with

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[79] Lacher and Steinberg, "Spreading Local Roots," German Institute for International and Security Affairs: Jihadism in Africa, June 2015, p 69. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf

[80] Daniel Flynn, "Al-Qaeda Group Confirms Death of Abou Zeid and Another Leader," Reuters, June 16, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mauritania-aqim-idUSBRE95F0DQ20130616.

[81] Simon Usborne, "Dead or Alive? Why the World's Most-Wanted Terrorist Has Been Killed at Least Three Times," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2016/nov/28/dead-or-alive-mokhtar-belmokhtar-most-wanted-terrorist-killed-three-times.

[82] "Niger Suicide Bombers Target Areva Mine and Barracks," BBC News, May 24, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22637084.

the Tigentourine attack, Belmokhtar presented these incidents as revenge for the French-led intervention in Mali.[83]

AQIM is also involved in intra-jihadist struggles in eastern Libya. AQIM supports Ansar al-Sharia Libya and other AQ-leaning groups against ISIL and the anti-Islamist/anti-jihadist General Khalifa Haftar.[84] Belmokhtar is the most prominent AQIM leader with a recurring presence in Libya. He reportedly set up training camps in southwestern Libya in 2011–2012, which he used to train fighters for the attack on Tigentourine.[85] The expulsion of ISIL from Sirte in late 2016 may ultimately benefit AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia Libya.

As Belmokhtar's career since 2013 demonstrates, AQIM has strong capabilities to mount spectacular attacks, but the Al-Qaeda affiliate faces several major pressures simultaneously: even as Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun perpetrated attacks on major energy sites and on urban hotels across northwest Africa from 2013 to 2016, Belmokhtar had repeated brushes with death and may be dead at the time of this writing. In northern Algeria, Droukdel and AQIM's battalions seem incapable of perpetrating major attacks. Regionwide, AQIM lacks the ability to hold territory except in conditions of extreme state weakness. Even then, AQIM can take territory only when it enjoys substantial rapport with local jihadists.

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[83] "'Al-Muwaqqi'un bi-l-Dam' Tatawa''ad Mazidan min al-Duwal [The Signers in Blood Threaten More Countries," Al Jazeera, January 21, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.net /news/arabic/2013/1/21/-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84.

[84] See AQIM, "Mas'alat Hirasat 'Abd al-Jalil wa-Dukhul al-Lajna al-Amaniyya (Darna-Libiya) [The Issue of Guarding Abd al-Jalil and the Entrance of the Security Committee (Derna-Libya)," May 23, 2015, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22ruling-on-guarding-mue1b9a3e1b9adafc481-abd-al-jalc4abl-and-entering-the-security-committee-darnah-libya22.pdf; and AQIM, "Bayan bi-Sha'n al-Iqtital al-Jari fi Madinat 'Darna al-Libiyya' [Statement on the Matter of the Ongoing Fighting in the Libyan City of Derna]," July 7, 2015, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/al-qc481_idah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-22on-the-ongoing-fighting-in-the-city-of-darnah-libya22.pdf.

[85] Tim Lister, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Al-Qaeda Figure Was a Legend Among Jihadists," CNN, June 14, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/14/world/mokhtar-belmokhtar/.

Security Vulnerabilities in Mali

Table 1 below summarizes the security vulnerabilities in Mali, where AQIM has been operating. While it is not the only place where AQIM operates in the Sahel region, we focus on Mali given its importance as a base of operations for the organization.

Table 1.   Security vulnerabilities in Mali (2003-2017)

Vulnerability	Details
Internal conflict	• Mali's separatist rebellions, led by segments of the ethnic Tuareg group beginning in the 1960s, eventually created a pool of political allies for AQIM in northern Mali. • AQIM's premier local partner became Iyad Ag Ghali, a former rebel. When the fourth Tuareg rebellion began in 2012, AQIM, Ag Ghali, and their partners quickly sidelined separatist rebels and imposed jihadist rule over northern cities. • Even after the French-led Operation Serval ended jihadist rule in early 2013, AQIM and its allies continue to benefit from the multi-sided conflict that still rages in northern Mali • The spread of this conflict into central Mali has empowered AQIM's allies among segments of the Fulani, another important ethnic group.
Weakness of the central government	• The Malian state has struggled to govern northern Mali since independence. The state's weakness allowed AQIM/GSPC to gain a foothold there in the early 2000s. • The state was not only unable to control crime – certain state officials even colluded with criminals, including AQIM.[86] • The weakness of the Malian state triggered events in 2012 that led to state collapse: first, Mali's armed forces began losing battles to separatist rebels; second, junior officers angered at these defeats launched a successful coup against the civilian government in the south; third, the chaos in Bamako helped AQIM and its allies extend

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[86] Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,* The Carnegie Papers, September 2012, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf, pp. 13-14.

	their control in the north. • Since Operation Serval, the state has not been able to impose law and order in northern and central Mali; the continuing chaos benefits AQIM.
Illegitimacy of the central government	• The Malian state is poor, corrupt, and deeply dependent on foreign aid. Many Malians appear disenchanted with mainstream politicians.[87] Such attitudes do not mean that Malians are flocking to AQIM, but this atmosphere does hurt the state's efforts to rebuild legitimacy. • Corruption continues to undermine efforts, both internal and external, to reform and strengthen Mali's armed forces.[88]
Demographic instability	• Mali has a high birthrate and a youth bulge (roughly half of the population was under 18 in 2012),[89] which may have boosted AQIM's recruitment.
Security sector ineffectiveness	• Mali's inability to confront AQIM militarily is a symptom of the weakness of the Malian state. Since the late 2000s, when AQIM first became a major security concern in Mali, the country's security forces have struggled to respond to AQIM. • Perhaps recognizing its own weakness, the Malian state has sometimes preferred to make deals with AQIM, especially prisoner exchanges.
Neighbors in crisis	• The origins of AQIM/GSPC in Mali date to the Algerian civil war and that country's crisis in the 1990s and early 2000s. • The Libyan revolution of 2011 contributed to Mali's destabilization by causing flows of fighters and weapons to northern Mali. This situation aided AQIM indirectly, by boosting Tuareg separatists and contributing to chaos in early 2012, and directly, when Libyan weapons reached AQIM.

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[87] Kamissa Camara, *Mali is becoming a failed state and it is not the jihadists' fault*, Africa Research Institute, November 16, 2016, https://www.africaresearchinstitute.org/newsite/blog/mali-becoming-failed-state-not-jihadists-fault/.

[88] Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities,* RAND Corporation, 2017, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1241/RAND_RR1241.pdf, p. 85.

[89] UNICEF, "Statistics," webpage, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html.

U.S. Approach to Counter AQIM

Table 2 on the next page describes the approaches the U.S. has taken to countering AQIM from 2003-2017.

Table 2.   U.S. approaches to AQIM (2003-2017)

US Approach	Details
Unilateral Direct Action	• Open sources give little indication that the U.S. has undertaken any unilateral direction action in Mali. However, the April 2012 deaths of three U.S. soldiers in a car crash in Bamako raised questions about the extent of covert U.S. operations in Mali.[90] • In 2015, U.S. forces in Bamako participated in the response to the Radisson hotel attack by AQIM and its allies; U.S. forces reportedly helped to move freed hostages to secure locations while Malian forces engaged AQIM gunmen.[91]
Security Cooperation/Building Partner Capacity (Train and Equip)	• Train-and-equip programs, run through the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), have been the centerpiece of U.S. counter-AQIM efforts in Mali. Mali was an original member of TSCTP's predecessor program, the Pan-Sahel Initiative, and Mali has often been the top recipient of bilateral TSCTP funding since that program's creation in 2005.[92] • 2009 saw a major increase in U.S. involvement in training missions in Mali, reflecting an increase in attacks by AQIM.[93] Joint Special Operations Task Force – Trans Sahara (JSOTF-TS) began to train and equip special counterterrorism units.[94] • The March 2012 coup in Mali prompted, for legal reasons, a suspension of U.S. assistance.[95] After the

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[90] Craig Whitlock, "Mysterious fatal crash provides rare glimpse of U.S. commandos in Mali," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/mysterious-fatal-crash-provides-rare-glimpse-of-us-commandos-in-mali/2012/07/08/gJQAGO71WW_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.c7b3e395c48e.

[91] "Mali attack: Special forces storm hotel to free hostages," BBC, November 20, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34877069.

[92] Niger was the top recipient for the 2005-2008 period, whereas Mali was for the 2009-2013 period. See http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08860.pdf, p. 12; and http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/664337.pdf, second page of document (no page number).

[93] Simon J. Powelson, *Enduring engagement yes, episodic engagement no: lessons for SOF in Mali,* Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive, 2013-12, http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/38996/13Dec_Powelson_Simon.pdf?sequence=1, p. 7.

[94] Powelson, "Enduring engagement yes, episodic engagement no: lessons for SOF in Mali," pp. 17-18.

	elections of July/August 2013, training resumed.
Civil Military Operations	• As part of TSCTP, the U.S. has deployed Civil Military Support Elements (CMSEs) to Mali and other TSCTP countries. For example, a CMSE and USAID delivered humanitarian aid in northern Mali prior to the 2012 crisis.[96] The CMSE's work involved, among other efforts, helping the Malian Ministry of Health to vaccinate populations in areas seen as vulnerable to AQIM's influence.[97] • The U.S. also deploys Military Information Support Teams (MIST) to TSCTP countries, and has done so at points in Mali.[98]
Support Host Nation	• Before and after the interruption in assistance, the U.S. has supported the Malian state and civil society in advancing democracy, strengthening governance, and promoting the rule of law. Prior to the 2012 coup, USAID addressed what it saw as root causes of terrorism in northern Mali, and working to increase access to potable water, create jobs for at-risk youth, and disseminate messages of peace through the radio.[99] • Since the restoration of assistance in 2013, one key U.S. program has been the Security Governance Initiative (SGI). SGI launched in 2014 with the intent of strengthening security and governance to combat and undermine terrorism in Africa. Initial funding for the program was set at $65 million, and Mali was one of the initial six partner countries.[100] In Mali, SGI has focused on capacity-building within the Ministries of Defense, Security, and Justice.[101]

[95] Whitlock, "Mysterious fatal crash provides rare glimpse of U.S. commandos in Mali."

[96] Jamie Evans-Butler and Lee Cohen, "A Collaborative Approach to Combating Instability in Northern Mali," USAID *Frontlines*, January/February 2012, https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/frontlines/democracy-human-rights-governance/collaborative-approach-combating.

[97] Major John P. Wishart, "Out of Africa: CMSEs Engage Vulnerable Popultations [sic] in West Africa to Counter Influence of Violent Extremist Organizations," Originally published in the October-December 2011 edition of *Special Warfare*, http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2404/SW2404OutOfAfrica.html.

[98] Jeffrey Swedberg and Steve Smith, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) Evaluative Study,* April 15, 2014, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00JXQ3.pdf, p. 18.

[99] *Strategy Statement: Mali*, USAID, April 30, 2006, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacg949.pdf, p. 12.

[100] "FACT SHEET: Security Governance Initiative," The White House, August 6, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-security-governance-initiative.

Messaging/ counter-messaging	• From 2008-2015, AFRICOM operated a news website called *Magharebia*, which sought to counter violent extremism in North and West Africa. • Counter-messaging is also done by MIST personnel (see above).
"Third Party" Partners	• Since the crisis of 2012-2013, the U.S. has had three key partners in Mali: France, the European Union, and the United Nations. • When France launched Operation Serval, the U.S. provided critical logistical support, airlifting French and African soldiers and equipment. The U.S. deployed approximately two dozen soldiers to Mali in 2013, including (as publicly reported) ten soldiers providing "liaison support" in non-combat roles, and another two-dozen stationed at U.S. Embassy Bamako.[102] • After Serval ended in 2014 and France transitioned to Operation Barkhane, a region-wide counterterrorism operation, the U.S. continued to provide "aerial refueling, transportation and intelligence assistance" to the French military.[103] • The U.S. also supports the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, the key Western-led security sector reform effort in the country since 2013.[104] • The U.S. has also provided significant support to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was established in May 2013. By August 2014, the U.S. had given $115 million to MINUSMA, and had spent an additional $173 million on "logistical support, training, and critical

[101]   "Security   Governance   Initiative,"   State   Department,   2015,   https://2009-2017.state.gov/ documents/organization/254115.pdf, p. 9.

[102] Craig Whitlock, "Pentagon Deploys a Small Number of Troops to War Torn Mali", *The Washington Post*, April 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-deploys-small-number-of-troops-to-war-torn-mali/2013/04/30/2b02c928-b1a0-11e2-bc39-65b0a67147df_story.html?utm_campaign=pubexchange_article&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=huffingtonpost.com&utm_term=.d719700709b2

[103] Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military Offers Support, but Not Troops, to Aid France in Africa," *New York Times*, May 12, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/world/africa/africa-us-military-aid-france.html.

[104] "FACT SHEET: U.S.-EU Cooperation on Common Security and Defense Policy," The White House, March 26, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/26/fact-sheet-us-eu-cooperation-common-security-and-defense-policy.

	equipment, such as vehicles and communications, to African peacekeepers deploying to MINUSMA and its predecessor, the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA)."[105]
Security Sector Reform	• Prior to 2012, U.S. programs in Mali focused on counterterrorism training rather than security sector reform per se. As noted above, since 2013 the premier security sector reform program in Mali has been the EUTM, in which the U.S. plays a supporting role. • The above-mentioned SGI program also has a substantial security sector reform component.
Intelligence and Information Sharing	• Since at least 2007, the U.S. has conducted intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) including manned and unmanned surveillance flights over the Sahara (including northern Mali).[106] Currently, AFRICOM operates at least four drone facilities with responsibility for conducting ISR in the Sahel-Sahara region; these facilities are in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.[107] • This intelligence is shared with France in support of Operation Barkhane.[108] Open sources do not say whether such information is shared with the government of Mali.

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[105] "FACT SHEET: U.S. Support for Peacekeeping in Africa," The White House, August 6, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-support-peacekeeping-africa.

[106] Craig Whitlock, "US Expands Secret Intelligence Operations in Africa," *The Washington Post*, June 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-expands-secret-intelligence-operations-in-africa/2012/06/13/gJQAHyvAbV_story.html?utm_term=.6f528c81e39c

[107] Abi Anyadike, "UPDATED: A rough guide to foreign military bases in Africa," *IRIN News,* February 15, 2017, https://www.irinnews.org/feature/2017/02/15/updated-rough-guide-foreign-military-bases-africa.

[108] Jim Garamone, "France Deploys Troops Globally in Counter-Extremism Fight," *DoD News*, January 17, 2017, https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1050644/france-deploys-troops-globally-in-counter-extremism-fight/.

Discussion

At any time did the U.S. effectively defeat, dismantle, or disrupt AQIM?

The U.S. has never attempted to **defeat** AQIM. Rather, the U.S. has attempted to enable Mali, France, and other partner governments to **disrupt and dismantle** AQIM. As of early 2017, the U.S. goal seems to be to contain and degrade AQIM by supporting France's Operation Barkhane, the EUTM, and MINUSMA. AFRICOM recognizes its limited role but seeks to do more, including "a more active role in defeating AQIM."[109]

For the most part, the U.S. has not directly attempted to **dismantle** AQIM. There has been almost no kinetic network targeting, with two significant exceptions:

- During Operation Serval, French-led forces killed several AQIM sub-commanders, notably Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd. These efforts relied on U.S. logistical support and perhaps also on U.S. intelligence.

- Beyond Mali, the U.S. and France have both attempted to kill AQIM sub-commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Libya; his death would be a blow to AQIM, but it remains unconfirmed.

U.S.-trained Malian forces have been ineffective at **dismantling** AQIM. Malian forces have registered few kills or captures of major AQIM figures. Moreover, the government of Mali's willingness to conduct prisoner exchanges with AQIM undermines the goal of dismantling AQIM; some European governments have paid hostage ransoms to AQIM and may continue to do so, which also complicates effort to dismantle the group.

U.S.-trained Malian forces have also been ineffective at **disrupting** AQIM. The Malian state was unable to prevent AQIM from making social, economic, and political inroads in the north. AQIM kidnapped thirty-nine Westerners in the Sahara between 2008 and 2012,[110] and used Mali as a key holding site for hostages.

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[109] "United States Africa Command 2017 Posture Statement," http://www.africom.mil/media-room/document/28720/africom-2017-posture-satement, p. 13.

[110] Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber (eds.), *Jihadism in Africa: Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances,* RP 5, June 2015, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf, p. 70.

The exception to this pattern of failure was Operation Serval. During Serval, U.S. support was critical to French-led efforts to **disrupt** AQIM in 2013. France and its partners, primarily Chad, successfully ended the control that AQIM and allied groups exercised over northern Malian cities.

Since 2013, however, the U.S. and France have not significantly **disrupted** AQIM and allied groups. Having resumed an underground existence, AQIM and its allies periodically carry out high-profile attacks on infrastructure and tourist sites throughout northwest Africa. Within Mali, jihadists are waging a sustained guerrilla campaign against the Malian state, rival armed groups, and MINUSMA. Such attacks have made northern Mali – and, increasingly, central Mali and northern Burkina Faso – extremely difficult to govern. The counterterrorism capacity of Mali's armed forces remains low.

Overall, U.S. efforts to **disrupt** AQIM in Mali have been ineffective for the following reasons.

- Washington *overestimated the Malian state as a partner*, both in terms of its democratic credentials and its effectiveness.

- U.S. train-and-equip *programs were ill matched to the capabilities of the Malian armed forces.* U.S. training was initially too episodic and brief to make a lasting difference in Malian units' effectiveness, and U.S. equipment was often too complicated for Malian soldiers to operate.[111]

- *TSCTP was poorly implemented*: approximately half of the funds allocated for fiscal years 2009-2013 were not disbursed. Moreover, "TSCTP program managers [were] unable to readily provide data on the status of" the disbursed funds.[112] Mali was the top recipient of bilateral TSCTP funding, but only $24.4 million of the approximately $40.6 million allocated for Mali was disbursed.[113] Although TSCTP programming in the arena of democracy and messaging had some positive effects on attitudes, such programming did not necessarily reach the most vulnerable populations in the north.[114] Monitoring and

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[111] Simon Powelson, *Enduring Engagement, Yes, Episodic Engagement, No: Lessons for SOF from Mali,* Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA. https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/38996

[112] *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, GAO Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, June 2014, http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/664337.pdf, first page (not numbered).

[113] *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, p. 16.

[114] *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Efforts in northwest Africa Would Be Strengthened by Enhanced Program Management*, p. 22.

evaluation of TSCTP programs was often poor or nonexistent, making it difficult to gauge such programs' success or failure.[115]

Did any security vulnerabilities emerge since the start of AQIM?

With respect to Mali, the only truly new vulnerability to emerge during the 2003-2017 period was the revolution and ensuing turmoil in Libya, which boosted the military capabilities of Tuareg separatists and of AQIM and its allies. Other vulnerabilities are not new, but they did worsen, particularly the weakness of the central state. The interlocking crises of early 2012 (the separatist rebellion and the military coup) were the culmination of long-term trends in Mali – but they were also ruptures that created rare opportunities for AQIM and its allies to hold territory.

What were the major shifts or changes in the U.S. approach?

In many ways, there has been continuity in the U.S. approach to Mali – in the bilateral relationship, the emphasis is on train-and-equip programs, combined with governance and development efforts. After the 2012-2013 crisis, several reviews of TSCTP were undertaken afterwards, but no major changes have been made to TSCTP. SGI is a program largely in line with previous approaches, although it more explicitly prioritizes security sector reform.

What has changed is the extent of the U.S. relationship with third parties in Mali. MINUSMA and the EUTM, both of which the U.S. supports, are new entities, and the U.S. partnership with France has deepened since 2012.

Another trend is the intensification of intelligence collection, particularly through surveillance flights, since 2007 and especially since 2013.

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[115] Swedberg and Smith, *Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) Evaluative Study*, p. 1.

Conclusion

In this case study, we examined AQIM's leadership structure, its relationship with Al-Qaeda core, its ideology and goals, and its funding. We also examined how the group has evolved over time. We outlined the vulnerabilities in Mali's security environment that AQIM has exploited, and the relative effectiveness of the U.S. government's approaches to counter AQIM over time. For the full context in which this case study was used, see the *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*.[116]

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[116] McQuaid, et. al., *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, CNA DRM-2017-U-015710-Final, August 2017.

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